

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART III – SECTION III

FROM NOAH TO ABRAHAM

I. After the Flood, problems start and the good and evil separate out again as Noah's sons show loyalty or disloyalty as the conflict now becomes intergenerational.

A. Noah's sons were named Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

1. Shem means "name" or "renown," and is the word for name used in chapter 4, verse 26 in saying men "called on the name of the Lord." See also Gen. 2:11, 13, 19, 20. The reference is usually positive, although it can refer to trying to gain renown for oneself away from God. See Gen. 6:4.
2. The name Ham means "hot" or "warm" or the verb equivalent. There could be a notion of someone who is impulsive or over-reaching.
3. Japheth is related to the Hebrew words for open or beautiful. He will be identified with the seafarers, who are less central to the history of the Chosen People.
4. Chapter 10 makes it clear that Shem is the oldest, with Ham in the middle and Japheth youngest.

B. As they leave the ark, subtle problems arise.

1. The first problem is that Noah is instructed to leave the ark with his wife; his sons would follow. But it appears he leaves with his sons, with his wife behind. There is a subtle ignoring of his wife in favor of those whom he believes will continue

the line. See Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 202.

2. Noah then plants a vineyard and, not realizing entirely what wine is, gets drunk.

a. The text says that he is the first one to plant a vineyard. Alcohol, like meat eating, is later in human development. The idea that wine drinking came only after the flood may be literal or figurative, but the reference does indicate that drinking is more of a social construct, not a desire innate in human beings; some cultures, such as the American Indians did not know what alcohol was until outsiders introduced it. Drunkenness will be a problem, but it is a result of boredom and social problems, not there at the beginning.

b. Part of the problem is that he undertakes this venture without consulting God and thus goes astray. He may also have been overwhelmed with the task before him; and, again, not turning to God in prayer, turned to drink, not realizing its power. St. Paul will later note the contrast between drunkenness and delight in prayer. See Eph. 5:18-20.

- St. Thomas Aquinas says later that such a mistake reduces, but does not eliminate the guilt of drunkenness; and the earthly consequences may still be severe. Summa Theologica II-II, question 150, article 2.

b. In any case, the drunkenness, like all drunkenness, leads to the degradation of human nature, in this case, exemplified by Noah's drunkenness. There is a terrible contrast between the nakedness of Adam and Eve due to their innocence, and this nakedness due to recklessness. As with King Saul later twice being overcome by the prophetic spirit, the first time to his glory and the second to his shame, the superficial similarities emphasize the dramatic spiritual differences. See 1 Sam, 10:9-13, 19:22-24; see also 1 Sam. 16:13.

- Later in Genesis, Lot becomes drunk because of the machinations of his daughters, has intercourse with them, and the lines of Moab and Ammon, enemies of Israel, grow from their offspring. See Gen. 19:30-38.

3. Ham, accidentally or intentionally, discovers his father's nakedness, and proceeds to delight in bringing shame to his father.

a. Ham is thus symbolic of all people who delight in ridiculing past generations or delighting in bringing shame upon a family. The Jews revered heritage, and Ham (even more so than the line of Cain, who seemingly forgot about their ancestors) is rejecting his heritage.

- The Jews had particularly harsh punishments for disrespect to parents or older people. See Duet. 21:21; 2 Kings 2:23-25.

b. Scott Hahn, following some Jewish commentators, argues that the crime was even worse, committing adultery with his own mother, Noah's wife, whom Noah had ignored. See A Father Who Keeps His Promises 85-86. The "uncovering of nakedness" was sometimes a euphemism for sexual sins. See Lev. 18:6-19. The implication is that Canaan was born from that union. The crime is not only a sexual one, but an attempt to overthrow his father. Absalom would later sleep with the concubines of his father, King David, as a symbol of his seizing of royal power from David. See 1 Kings 16:20-22.

c. In any case, the situation has become even worse as Ham tries to get his brothers to join in.

4. Shem and Japheth refuse the temptation and show respect for their father. They know of their father's sin, for the sake of correcting it, but attempt to know the least about it that they can. There is an honest reverence for their father, reflecting the honest reverence that all peoples are called to, correcting the sins of their ancestors, but not glorying in them. That reverence for ancestors, while recognizing the need to correct sins, is at the essence of true familial piety and patriotism. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II, question 101, article 4.

B. When he finds out about Ham's betrayal, Noah responds by cursing Ham's son Canaan and blessing Sham and Japheth, with Sham apparently receiving the greater blessing, probably because he was more in the lead.

1. Noah strangely curses, not Ham directly, but Canaan, one of his sons and presumably the oldest and perhaps only one yet born. He will be a slave to his "brothers." The term brothers could be any relatives, but verses 26 and 27 make it clear

that it is his uncles, Shem and Japheth, and likely their descendants. The Book of Wisdom would describe the Canaanites, who were in the Promised Land before the Chosen People as a "people cursed from the beginning," although one that God wished to lead back to Him. See Wis. 12:11.

- It is true that the sins of parents can affect their children, but there does seem something inappropriate about Noah going out of his way to make that happen, as well as his own failure to take responsibility. As is the case throughout the Bible, the heroes are not presented as perfect.

- The curse of slavery is an image that sins make us slaves of desire, and therefore, those who dole out desire, which is worse than physical slavery. See John 8:34; Rom. 6:16-17. Thus, Noah's curse, as terrible as it is, serves as a warning to the descendants of Ham (physical and more importantly moral) of the worse consequences of sin.

2. Noah especially blesses Shem, thanking God by name (Yahweh) as the God of Shem. The implication is that God will especially guide Shem and make his people great. Later, God would identify Himself to Moses as "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Ex. 3:15.
3. Japheth receives a blessing of greatness on earth, and divine blessing under the shadow of Shem. His descendants will be blessed by the intercession of the Chosen People. See Gen. 12:3.

II. Chapter 10 then describes the list of nations that descend from Noah's sons.

A. The descendants of each son constitute one of the types of people. The descendants reflect two things.

1. For the most part, but not entirely, they represent the different language groups. The descendants of Japheth are Indo-European language cultures, the descendants of Ham are the Hamitic language cultures in northeast Africa and southern Arabia, and the descendants of Shem are the Semitic language peoples, including the Israelites.

2. The classifications also represent the relationship to Israel. Thus, the descendants of Japheth are outside peoples who had not had many dealings with the Israelites at the time that Genesis was written. The descendants of Ham include most of the enemies of Israel, including Egypt, the Hittites and the Canaanites, although there are many others elsewhere. That is one reason why the Canaanites and the cities of Babylon and Nineveh are in this category even though they are Semitic. The descendants of Shem would be the Chosen People and some other people in Arabia they tended to sympathize with.

B. The descendants of Japheth include: (1) the Greeks, with Javan another name for Ionia, Elisha and Kittin names for Cyprus, and Ronanim another name for Rhodes; (2) northern peoples such as Gomer, which was another name for the Cimmerians who lived south of the Black Sea, and Ashkenaz, which appears to be a Germanic people; and (3) the Persians (Medei) to the east. These peoples, especially the Greeks and Persians would later have a great influence on the Chosen People, but not until the end of the Exile for the Persians, or the 320s for the Greeks.

C. The descendants of Ham, as one might expect, were mostly enemies of Israel.

1. Cush is another name for Ethiopia, which itself had few dealings with Israel. However, through Nimrod, the quintessential conqueror, Cush becomes an ancestor of Babylon, which conquered the Southern Kingdom in 596-586 B.C., and Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C.

- It is curious why these two capitals in the East (modern day Iraq) are associated with Cush, to the south of Egypt, when these groups are plainly very different, both culturally and geographically.

- One reason might be that, in 723 B.C. Cush very briefly took over Egypt, and thus was, like Assyria, which was on the offensive at the same time, considered synonymous with conquering nations, who are in turn represented by Nimrod. Nimrod becomes thus a figure for all human conquests. Interestingly, even he has power as a hunter "by the grace of God," indicating that all power comes in the end from God even if it is misused later, as his strength is here.

- There are some other descendants of Cush who are not enemies, including the mysterious Havilah.

- Other descendants of Ham include: (1) Canaan, the father of the peoples in the Promised Land before Israel; (2) Mizraim in Egypt; and (3) Put, a name for modern day Libya, which was not a particular actor in Israeli history.

2. Canaan's descendants were mostly enemies of Israel, or otherwise very problematic, including Sodom and Gomorrah. However, included in this list is Sidon, whose king Hiram helped Kings David and Solomon build the Temple. See 1 Kings 9:10-28. One message is that no peoples are hopeless.

3. Seth's descendants go in two lines from Shem's great-grandson Eber. One line, descending from Peleg proceeds to Abraham and the Chosen People. The other line, descending from Eber's brother Joktan, populates the Arabian Peninsula. Among them is Sheba, whose country's queen would return to consult Solomon, and Ophir, from which Israel apparently obtained gold and festal clothes. See 1 Kings 9:28, 10:1-13; Ps. 45:10.

- There is some question about what the division of the world under Peleg means. The name Peleg is derived from the Hebrew word *nipiega*, meaning "was divided. It may be that there was a division of the land God had allotted, as would later occur between Abraham and his nephew Lot in chapter 13.

III. In chapter 11, the descendants of the lines of Ham and Seth then establish very different heritages, one based upon power and accomplishments and the other based upon God and the family.

A. Nimrod's descendants built the tower of Babel trying to unite people under an earthly accomplishment.

1 According to chapter 10, verse 10, he (or his descendants) established cities, including Babylon, in the land of Shinar, which appears to be southern Mesopotamia.

2. Chapter 11 opens with a seemingly peaceful setting with everyone speaking the same language and one group migrating to Shinar.

3. At first, their intentions were not evil, for they simply made bricks for building. But then they decided to use their skill for the sake of a building that would do three things: (1) have its top in the sky; (2) make a name (in Hebrew shem) for themselves; and (3) unite all peoples under the tower and the city. There is an element of fear as well, for they are afraid of being scattered all over the world. Significantly missing is any reference to God or the family. Power and wealth are the controlling principles.

- Later on, Israel would demand a king, in order to be stronger and more like other nations, lacking trust in God. See 1 Sam. 8:1-9. God had apparently wanted them eventually to have a king, but not one who would rule by force, for he was not to have a large army, nor a large treasury, and was not to marry many wives (who would seal alliances with foreign nations.) See Duet. 17:14-20. God also warned that wealth would lead His People into idolatry. See Duet. 8:10-20. Instead they were to trust in God. Unfortunately the kings of Israel and Judah did not generally trust in God and, starting during Solomon's reign, the kingdom (and later kingdoms) went downhill.

4. To limit the evil, God confuses their language. The message is that much division and misunderstanding in the world comes from pride, but that such confusion is necessary lest people become more arrogant. Starting with Pentecost, the Church would unify people of every time and place, in anticipation of all nations coming together again in the heavenly Jerusalem. See PS. 87; Is. 60:11-14; Acts 2; Rev. 21:24-27.

5. The term Babel is a combination of the words for Babylon and balii, which means 'he confused.' The tower may be a mockery of the ziggurat, the Babylonian and Sumerian temples

B. By contrast, the line from Shem to Abraham is marked by familial continuity.

1. The ages for having children are now more common, from 29 to 34, but the life spans are again very long, such that all eleven generations from Noah to Abraham are living at the same time.

- Long lifespan were also considered very good because they would give a person longer to develop in virtue and wisdom. The Book of Wisdom would later say that God allows some people to die young because their progress in

purity, virtue and wisdom had already won the "the crown of old age" and "fullness of a long career." See Wis. 4:7-14.

2. There is great fruitfulness as every father has a son and "other sons and daughters," implying at least five children and probably more.
3. The text speaks of every generation in exactly the same terms, which implies certain stability.
4. The one hint at problems is that the lifespan declines by about half after the division of the world between Peleg and Joktan.